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# THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



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## LIFE HISTORY OF THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR PART II.—HISTORICAL DATA AND RANGE OF THE CONDOR <sup>a</sup>

By WILLIAM L. FINLEY

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN AND THE AUTHOR

THE report that the California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) will soon become extinct is not without foundation. It has a range more restricted than any other bird of prey. Since the time when the western part of the United States was settled, the breeding range has contracted, and the condor's numbers have greatly decreased; altho it is still found in the wilder mountainous sections, it is nowhere common.

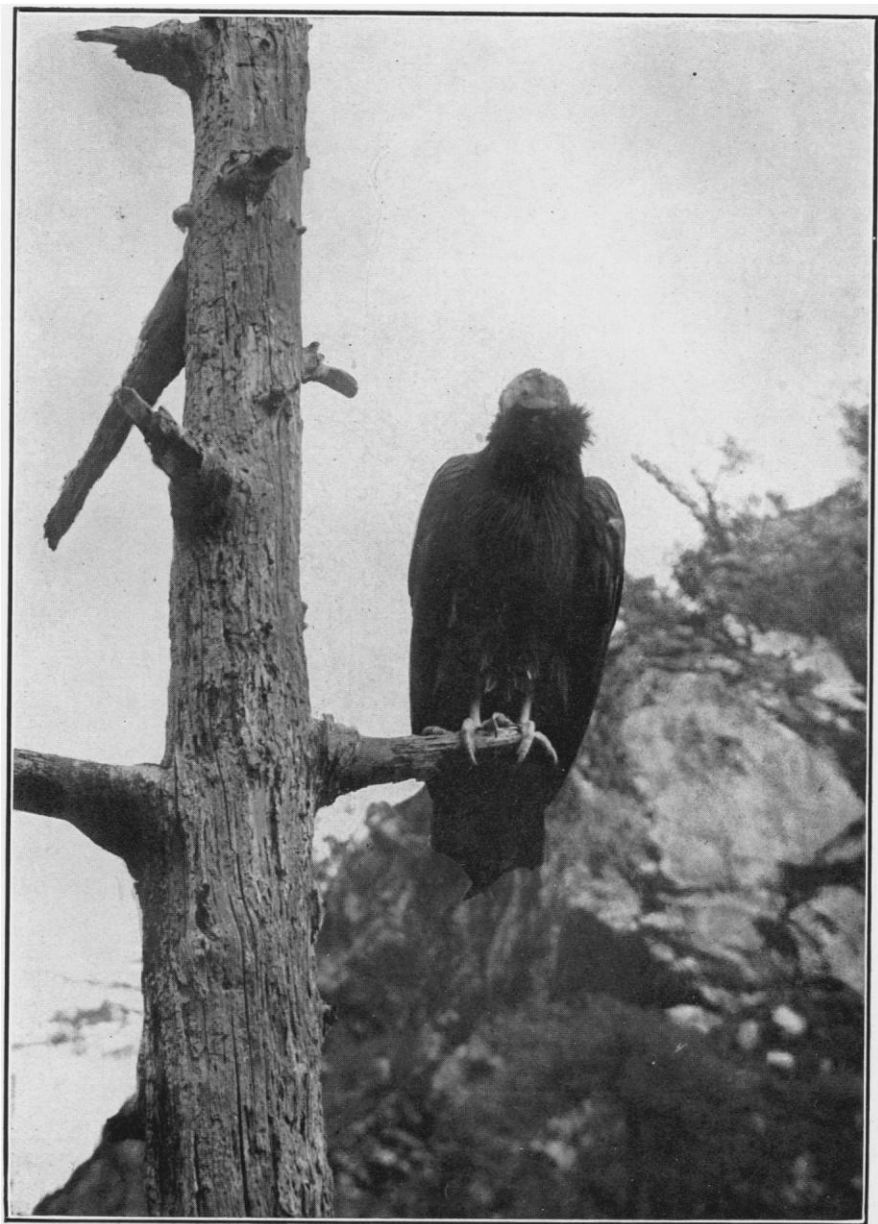
Formerly the California Condor was frequently seen about the mountainous regions of central and southern California. The birds were fearless and tame about their nesting places. There are many records of their being shot merely because they furnished good marks for irresponsible hunters who wandered thru these mountains.

The main cause which has been given for the decrease in condor numbers seems to be that when stock raising became common in California years ago, in order to secure pasture during the dry months, the rangers were compelled to drive their herds back into the more remote mountainous parts. Here they invaded the retreats of panthers, grizzlies, and coyotes. These preyed upon calves and sheep and created considerable damage. The quickest and best way of getting rid of these animals was by baiting the carcasses with poison. Since the condors came to feed on the poisoned animals, numbers of the big birds were undoubtedly killed in this way.

Almost any other bird might hold its own in the struggle for existence against

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<sup>a</sup> NOTE—My first article on the Life History of the California Condor was published in the Nov.-Dec., 1906, number. Since then Mr. W. Lee Chambers, who has been collecting data on the California Condor for several years, has kindly loaned me his notes and I have embraced some of these in the following article, which will be followed by a third article on the home life and habits of this bird.—W. L. F.



ADULT CALIFORNIA CONDOR ON FAVORITE PERCH NEAR NESTING SITE;  
TELEPHOTO VIEW

Photographed and Copyrighted by Finley and Bohlman

these forces, but the condor is too slow in recuperating its numbers. Even under favorable circumstances, each pair of condors will raise but one offspring a year. Oftentimes a pair of condors are very irregular in nesting. One collector states that in a certain locality where a pair of the birds live, they have nested but three times in about twelve years. Under these conditions it is not surprising that the condor numbers are decreasing, and unless the needed protection is given, this bird will undoubtedly follow the Great Auk.

If one were to begin collecting data on the California Condor, he would soon discover how little is really known. For a number of years, Mr. W. Lee Chambers has been collecting records to ascertain the exact number of the eggs of this bird that are in existence. These records reach up to the year 1906. At that time there were only forty-one eggs of this condor in the various museums and private collections of the world, while there are over seventy eggs of the Great Auk. There were about half a dozen of the birds in captivity. Of the eggs, twenty-six are first



CONDOR JUST DROPPING OFF HER PERCH IN FLIGHT;  
TAKEN AT I-1200 PART OF A SECOND EXPOSURE

class and fifteen second class. A number of eggs may have been taken in the early days, but very few of these are in existence at the present time. An egg in the possession of J. H. Gurney, England, was taken in April, 1859. As far as the records show, there were four taken about the year 1870, one in 1889, three in 1895, two in 1897, three in 1898, one in 1899, eight in 1900, three in 1901, six in 1902, one in 1903, and three in 1905.

The best early historical account of the California condor was published in Hutchings' California Magazine in the June, July and August numbers of 1859. It was written by Mr. Alexander S. Taylor. Altho the

bird had been known to the scientific world since mentioned by Shaw in 1779, yet neither the bird nor the egg had been properly described, except from hearsay. Both Douglas in 1827, and Townsend in 1837, as related in Audubon, failed to discover the nest or ever got to see the eggs. Douglas assumed and stated dogmatically that the color of the egg was "jet black", which information was secured from the Indians.

It is interesting to note that the egg taken at this time, from which Mr. Taylor secured his description, is still in existence. This is very likely the oldest egg of the California condor, and is now in the collection of J. H. Gurney in England. The egg was secured from a hunter who took it the last week in April, 1859. Mr. Taylor recounts that the egg was laid in the hollow of a tall oak tree near the summit of one of the highest peaks in the vicinity of Tularcitos, near a place called Cunejos. This is the only record we have of the condor ever nesting

in a tree, and altho this record has been repeated in many books on ornithology, it cannot be regarded as completely authentic. It may safely be said that the nesting site of the California condor is always a pot-hole in the side of a cliff, a cave, or a recess in behind a large rock on the steep mountain side. There is no effort at nest building, but the single egg is laid on the bare ground.

The egg which Mr. Taylor secured weighed ten and a half ounces and the contents weighed eight and three-quarter ounces. A specimen that was killed on the beach at Monterey at this time was carefully measured by Mr. Taylor. It weighed twenty pounds; from beak to the end of tail feathers it measured four feet and a half; from tip to tip of wing it measured eight feet, four inches; one wing, three feet three inches; tail feathers, twelve in number, fifteen inches long.

As to the size of a full grown California condor, Mr. Frank Stephens says: "I believe that a bird that measures full ten feet, laid on its back on the floor and marked at wing tips without really stretching the bird, is an exceptionally large



PAIR OF ADULT CONDORS ON A FAVORITE PERCH

bird." Mr. Stephens gives the measurements and weights of six different condors as follows: the first three killed at Julian, the fourth at Ballena, and the other two at Santa Ysabel, California.

1. March 13, 1888; length 44.1 inches; spread 102.4 inches (1120x2600mm.); female, not quite mature; weight 16 pounds.
2. May 11, 1888; length 45.7; spread 112.2 (1160x2850 mm.); adult male; weight 19 pounds, eviscerated.
3. June 2, 1888; length 43.1; spread 110.7 (1095x2795); weight 21 pounds.
4. June 25, 1888; length 44.3; spread 110; adult male; weight 20 pounds.
5. May 10, 1899; length 44; spread 112; female, not quite mature.
6. May 24, 1899; length 45; spread 112 (1140x2845 mm.); adult male.

Mr. Arthur Wilcox says, "The average weight of the California vulture is twenty pounds, twenty-six being the maximum. The spread of wings is nine feet,

eleven feet four inches being the largest I have collected. This was secured on the Loma Pelon Mountains in Santa Barbara County."

In some of our works on ornithology, the authors seem to think that the California condor lays two eggs, altho there is no authority for such a statement, except by analogy with the turkey-buzzard.

One collector states, "I know positively of three instances where they laid but one egg and no instance where they laid more than one. I have talked with other men that know and they say they lay only one egg at a setting, which I am satisfied is right." Another collector gives these facts, "A condor never lays a second egg in the same season. I have taken eight of them, and never more than one in a nest. Most people think that the bird lays two eggs. I have investigated several such stories and always found them to be buzzards' nests."

Major Bendire gives credence to an old wood-chopper who says he saw a condor's nest which was a huge affair, about seventy-five feet from the ground, on the first limb of a redwood tree. The place was near his camp where he had excellent chances of observation. He said that there were two young, and they were nearly three weeks learning to fly. To any one who has studied condor habits, this story discredits itself.

Fourteen different eggs of the California condor show the following measurements in inches: 2.48x4.08, 2.53x4.28, 2.55x4.39, 2.58x4.57, 2.59x4.52, 2.60x4.30, 2.62x4.38, 2.62x4.44, 2.62x4.52, 2.65x4.40, 2.68x4.28, 2.68x4.50, 2.70x4.50, and 2.73x4.22.

The size and strength of the condor have often been exaggerated. There have been many absurd stories about these birds killing sheep and other animals. A short time ago I saw an account in a daily paper of where a hunter claimed he saw a condor sailing away with a hind quarter of venison in its talons. Mr. Alexander Taylor makes the statement that this vulture has been known to kill and carry off a hare in its claws. It is extremely doubtful that one of these birds would ever attack a living animal. The habit of this vulture is to wait till after death. As to the condor's carrying its prey, this is easily discredited by a study of the condor foot. The claws are blunt and weak, and the foot is not adapted for grasping or carrying as an ordinary bird of prey.

In regard to the range of the California condor, it is sure to be somewhat vague as long as we have wide stretches of rough mountainous regions in the West where little or no study has been given.

Beginning at the south, Mr. Nelson and Mr. Anthony both record the bird in Lower California. Mr. Anthony states, "I found the bird more or less common along the extension of the San Bernardino Mountains, that are known in Lower California as the Lagoon Range. I often saw as many as three at a time, but never shot any. I have not found its nest, nor could the natives of that section give me any information. Some told me that it nested in the crags on the east side of San Pedro, which may very likely be true, but I doubt any one's being able to prove it. The Indians and Mexicans use the large quills from the wings to carry gold dust, and seldom allow a condor to escape."

Altho we have plenty of records of the condor in Lower California, we have none directly across the Gulf in Mexico proper. Mr. Ridgway states, "I do not know of any Mexican or Central American record of the California vulture. There are several from Lower California, but none from Mexico proper."

Among the earlier records, the bird was reported in Arizona, and it was said it had been seen as far east as Utah, but this last was rather vague.

Mr. Herbert Brown who was stationed at Fort Yuma for some time, and has

traveled extensively thru Arizona, says, "I regret that I cannot give you any information on the California condor."

Mr. George F. Breninger wrote, "I know of no instance of the California condor in Arizona."

Mr. O. W. Howard who spent many years in the Huachuca and Chiricahua Mountains of southern Arizona, both of which ranges extend into Mexico, has seen no California condors or found any trace of them.

This seems to settle fairly well the southern limits of the condor's range. We find a few scattered in the San Jacinto Range, which is a small range about forty or



ADULT CALIFORNIA CONDOR ON MOUNTAIN SIDE NEAR ITS NEST

fifty miles from the coast extending thru Riverside and San Diego Counties. A few have been noted in the lower end of the San Bernardino Range during recent years. Where the San Gabriel Mountains cut thru Los Angeles County, condors are a little more numerous, and from this district thruout the mountainous regions of Los Angeles, Ventura, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey Counties, the largest number of these birds are found, but they are nowhere common.

There have been a few straggling records of the condor north of Monterey County in California, but none of recent date.

Dr. J. K. Townsend informed Audubon that "The California vulture inhabits the region of the Columbia River to a distance of five hundred miles from its mouth and is most abundant in spring, at which season it feeds on the dead salmon that are thrown upon the shores in great numbers. It is also met with near the Indian villages, being attracted by the offal of the fish thrown around their habitations." He also stated: "The California vultures cannot be called, however, a plentiful species, as even in the situations mentioned, it is rare to see more than two or three at a time, and these so shy as not to allow an approach to within a hundred yards, unless by stratagem. Although I have frequently seen this bird, I have never heard it utter a sound. The eggs I have never seen, nor have I had any account of them, that I could depend upon. I have never heard of their attacking living animals. Their food while on the Columbia is fish almost exclusively, as this food is always found in great abundance near the falls and rapids—they also feed on dead animals. At Fort Vancouver I saw two feeding on the carcass of a pig." Altho Townsend's statement is convincing, some people have doubted the authenticity of this record, since no one has since recorded the California condor in the region of the Columbia River. Dr. Newberry, Dr. Suckley, and Dr. Cooper could find no other records of the bird in Oregon.

The most striking record on the present range of the California condor is one from Douglass County in southern Oregon. This seems very unusual, as we can find nothing else in recent years of the bird living between the San Francisco region and this place, altho it is a stretch of several hundred miles.

The Oregon records were given by Mr. George Peck and his son Mr. Henry Peck, who are both reliable ornithologists, and who were both well acquainted with the bird in southern California. Mr. Henry Peck informs me that on or about July 4, 1903, he and his father saw two California condors at Drain, Douglass County, Oregon. They were quite high in the air and were sailing about over the mountains. The elder Mr. Peck saw them several times after that. He states the birds were instantly recognized by both of them. Again in March, 1904, Mr. Henry Peck writes, "I saw four condors which were very close to me, almost within gun shot. I recognized them first by their size, and second by the white feathers under their wings. The birds were all flying very low, as there was a high wind blowing." Mr. Peck also gives the record of a condor that was killed on the coast of southern Oregon a number of years ago.

These records seem to show that if the California condor was formerly found in the region of the Columbia river, the numbers have decreased and the last of these northern birds seem to have taken refuge in the rough mountain regions of southern Oregon, while the range of the condor in California has contracted to regions from Monterey County south thru the mountains of the Coast Range and the extension of the San Bernardino Range into Lower California.

*Portland, Oregon.*

## THE LOCUST-DESTROYING BIRDS OF THE TRANSVAAL <sup>a</sup>

By DR. FREDERICK W. D'EVELYN

THE relation of birds to agriculture is one of much importance and is worthy of the closest investigation as well as the fullest consideration in order to arrive at results which constitute a safe experience for practical application. The advance of civilization of necessity interferes with the natural order of things,

<sup>a</sup> Paper read before the Cooper Ornithological Club of California, September 21, 1907.